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Conservative groups tell Durenberger to back Contra aid

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A coalition of conservative activists representing 22 political and religious groups has written to Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman David Durenberger urging him to support the administration's request for \$100 million in aid for Nicaragua's anti-communist resistance forces.

"The American people will not accept the consolidation of a communist state on the American mainland," the March 11 letter states. "The thousands of Minnesota conservatives we represent will not remain passive should Congress vote down the aid."

Mr. Durenberger, a two-term Minnesota Republican, stated Tuesday that he opposes Reagan administration plans to use \$70 million of the aid package for covert military support to an estimated 20,000 anti-Sandinista guerrillas operating in and around Nicaragua. He will not face re-election until 1988.

A spokesman for Mr. Durenberger would not comment on the letter.

Funds for covert military operations run by the Central Intelligence Agency must be approved by the Senate and House intelligence oversight committees.

Peter T. Flaherty, who helped organize the effort, said the letter was sent in the hope of winning over Mr. Durenberger before an expected vote on the aid next week. He said Mr. Durenberger has voted for covert military aid in the past but has been under pressure to oppose the measure from religious and peace groups in Minnesota.

"Sen. Durenberger claims he's a supporter of the freedom fighter," said Mr. Flaherty, an activist with Citizens for Reagan. "We think he can demonstrate that support by voting for the aid."

Another signer, Michael Schwartz, said he hopes Mr. Durenberger will vote in favor of the Nicaraguan aid because of the harsh religious repression under the Sandinistas.

Other signers represented such groups as Free the Eagle, The Conservative Caucus, Fund for a Conservative Majority, National Jewish Coalition and Fund for a Conservative Majority.

The letter states that the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua has stepped up its repression of the Catholic Church and Protestant religious groups, helped terrorists in Columbia assault that country's Supreme Court, and continues to support El Salvador's Marxist guerrillas, "who publicly announced their delight at the space shuttle tragedy [and] ... described the shuttle crew

as 'war criminals.' "

"There can be no doubt in anybody's mind that the Sandinistas are operating a totalitarian regime which persecutes religion, and I think any religious person ought to be concerned about that," Mr. Schwartz said. "As a Catholic, I'm particularly concerned because of the effort of the Sandinistas to subvert and suppress the Catholic Church there."

Mr. Schwartz said Sandinista persecution of religious minorities — Jews and Protestants — is "more severe" than attacks on the Catholic Church because the smaller groups are more vulnerable.

— Bill Gertz